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RUGGED WINTER INCREASES REFUGE USE BY WYOMING ELK

Heavy snows this past winter resulted in exceptional demands on the hay supply which the National Elk Refuge in Wyoming, keeps available for such emergencies. At the peak of the feeding program, approximately 11,600 elk were consuming 1,300 bales or 55 tons every 24 hours, according to Secretary of the Interior Douglas McKay. The Secretary added that 4,000 tons of hay will have been fed to the elk before winter permits their return to natural feeding ranges.

Each year a large quantity of hay is stored to meet normal needs of the elk. In addition, a reserve supply is held available for use during critical seasons such as the one just experienced. The heavy demands of the elk this year have greatly reduced the reserve of hay, requiring that an increased quantity be stored in the months ahead.

A census of elk taken in mid-March showed that in addition to the 11,600 on the refuge, there were 3,100 elk on the Wyoming feeding grounds adjacent and another 3,100 on the more protected ranges. This brought the total of Jackson Hole elk to approximately 18,000 animals.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has administered the National Elk Refuge principally as a wintering area to supplement the summering habitat provided for elk in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, thereby giving the herd year-round protection. A cooperative agreement with the State of Wyoming is designed to regulate the hunting pressure and to restrict the feeding herd to approximately 7,000 animals, although this obviously has not yet been achieved.

This year heavy snows and cold weather forced thousands of the animals from their normal wintering places down to the feeding areas. The harvest of elk is subject to State game laws on nonrefuge lands and hunting is the normal method of controlling the size of the herd. The annual elk kill in the State is slightly more than 9,000 according to Wyoming sources. This figure includes the harvest on the Big Horn herds and other units.

Another solution to the intense concentration of the elk herd in the Jackson Hole area is sought through the transplanting of elk to other suitable habitat in the State. This the State is accomplishing by trapping methods, and 250 elk are now being captured for transfer to other parts of the State. It is felt that in this way the elk may develop familiarity with new areas and alter their migration pattern to include additional habitat in their winter range.

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